



## Charlton Heston *FROM MOUNT SINAI TO LOS ALAMOS*

**Though Charlton Heston passed away several years ago, in 2008, the Academy Award–winning actor lives on through his epic and timeless films. He starred in *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *El Cid* but also played a starring role for Los Alamos National Laboratory later in his career.**

Heston was born in Illinois in 1923. As a boy, he moved with his family to Michigan, where he developed interests in hunting, fishing, and acting. While attending Northwestern University on a drama scholarship in 1944, at the height of World War II, Heston joined the Army Air Forces and was deployed to the Pacific to fight against Imperial Japan.

As the end of the war came into sight, Heston, who was a gunner aboard a B-25 bomber, prepared for the seemingly inevitable invasion of the Japanese home islands. The invasion, however, never happened. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 helped bring World War II to an abrupt—and victorious—conclusion.

After the war, Heston returned home to his wife and gradually started making a name for himself as an actor. In the years that followed, Heston would become a Hollywood legend, accumulating numerous awards and an international following. But he never forgot the role the atomic bombs may have played in saving his life.



*Trinitite, a rock containing glassy parts created inside the fireball from the world's first nuclear explosion. The glassy parts were made from melted sand and radioactive bits of the nuclear device. Almost all Trinitite is green, as shown here, but some is either black or red, black if it contains bits of the device's supporting tower, and red if it contains copper from the device or from communications cables at the test site. (Photo: Open Source)*

In recalling the potential cost involved in an invasion of Japan, Heston said, “U.S. losses were expected to be one million men. One million men who would not come home. I don’t know if I would have been among them or not, of course . . . but I’m glad I didn’t have to find out.”

When longtime LANL filmmaker Charles Barnett contacted Heston in early 1983 to gauge his interest in narrating documentaries for the Laboratory, Heston enthusiastically accepted. He refused, however, to accept any compensation for his services.

Upon receiving a security clearance, Heston set to work immediately on a series of classified documentaries showcasing several of the Laboratory’s national security programs. Early on, Heston provided narration for a short film called *Project Whitehorse*, which served as an introduction to LANL’s Strategic Defense Initiative research, and hosted a programmatic overview of the Laboratory called *The Flavius Factor*.

One of Heston’s final Los Alamos films, *Trust, But Verify*, documented the U.S.-Soviet collaboration on nuclear testing

verification technologies. Though virtually all of Heston’s films were originally classified, *Project Whitehorse*, *The Flavius Factor*, and *Trust, But Verify* are now publicly available.

During one of Heston’s first visits to Los Alamos, he was presented a very special gift, a piece of Trinitite, a glassy rock made by the heat of the Trinity test of July 16, 1945 (see photo). Interestingly, he chose to give it away. “I took it home and gave it to my son, Fraser, . . . because it occurred to me that it was, in a very real sense, his birthstone,” said Heston. “In the summer of 1945, when the blast that coalesced the sands . . . into Trinitite was set off, Fraser was unconceived and his mother was still in school.”

Having seen war firsthand, Heston strongly believed nuclear weapons could play an ongoing role in preventing conflicts on a global scale. The pursuit of peace motivated Charlton Heston to work with Los Alamos, just as it continues to motivate the Laboratory’s national security scientists today. ✦

~Alan Carr



In 1988, while filming *Trust, But Verify*, Heston visited the Nevada Test Site. In this photo he poses with his official DOE escort, Sally Kendall, and Los Alamos scientist Bob Geffries. (Photo: Courtesy Former LANL Test Director Walt Wolff)